Avondale Mills Project

Interviewer: Edward Akin

Interviewee: George Hackworth, at his home in Stevenson, AL

12/1/1980

A: This is an interview with Mr. George Hackworth in his home in Stevenson on December 1, 1980. Uh, Mr. Hackworth, I was looking over that questionnaire form that we'd filled out, you know a month or so ago, and I noticed that you had—I don't know if you had been born in Tuscumbia or not, but you had spent a good deal of your childhood there. How is it that you ended up in Stevenson? You know, just give us a background of your growing up.

H: Well, see, my father died and I went to stay with my uncle that lives here in Tuscumbia and go to school, 'cause that's where I got…went to school the first part of '39 down there and came back….

A: So your folks lived here, around here in Stevenson or nearabout?

H: Edgefield.

A: Yeah, which is just right up the road. Now, from what you know about your family background, had they been in this area for a couple of generations, or had they just come, or do you know anything about how your folks came?

H: Well, on my dad's side, I think they had been here for years. My mother—mother's side was English of course …On my daddy's side—well, they've been here for years.

A: I've noticed that the Hackworth family—both here and down in the southern part of the county, too, seem to have been in Jackson County for several generations.

H: Right.

A: So, now they lived out at Edgefield. Did they have a farm out there?

H: Yeah, my grandpa owned a farm at that time out there.

A: Now was your dad, before he died, was he, what—farming your granddad's place, or…

H: Farm or working rock quarry

A: Yes. Now, how old were you when your father died?

H: I'd say about maybe eight—eight years old pretty close a year

A: Now were you the oldest child or the youngest?

H: Nah, the one third one third

A: So, you had what?

H: Brother and sister, older

A: Older than you. And then how many came along after you?

H: Well, there's one dead between me and my other sister, and then I've got a younger brother.

A: Now, you said your father had died when you were about eight, so…

H: Well, eight or nine.

A: Now was it right after that or later on that you wet to live with your uncle for a while?

H: Oh, I believe it was 1932, 33, one.

A: Yeah, and you stayed in Tuscumbia how long?

H: '39, I believe it was.

A: So about, what, seven years?

H: '40, really. I came back here in '40

A: Now, as I recall, you were born in 1919.

H: Right.

A: So, you came back here, you were about twenty.

H: I came back here in 1940.

A: And so at that age, I guess you had already been doing some work before you came back.

H: Well, what I done is I come up here and stayed with sister in the summer time, you know. And we put every—and I'd work these odd jobs, you know, make a little money.

A: Yeah. And so you and your wife married right after…?

H: Forth day of August, 1940.

A: And, now it wasn't until 1942 that you started working at Avondale, so what did you do until then? Did you—

H: I worked in the Turner mill, worked at the Plainer Mill. George Phillips Plainer Mill.

A: What, lumber?

H: Mm-hmm plaining dressing.

A: So what, just as a saw operator, or stacking lumber of whatever?

H: Just whatever they put there for me.

A: So, when you started working with Avondale. World War II had already started.

H: That's right.

A: Uh, what was the first job that you took at the mill?

H: I believe they started learning me on the cards.

A: Right. In the carding room.

H: The carding department, yeah.

A: That's when—right after the cotton first comes in, isn't it before—

H: Goes through the pickers, comes through the pickers, makes a lap, before the card, and then they make slubber by the cards and so the slubbers at that time—makes all the difference now. At that time. Then went to spinning and then from spinning they run in on winders twisted and stuff A: That was back when Mary Ann was the only mill up here. Now by 1942, had you started your family yet? Did you have any kids?

H: Yeah, my oldest daughter. She was born in 1941 on the last day of May.

A: Now, how many other children did you—?

H: Her and the boy's the only two.

A: And he was born…?

H: '46. The 18th of March, 1946. War between them.

A: Yeah. Now, did you continue to work at Avondale throughout the war and on in—

H: Everything. Still working.

A: When did you come into the village?

H: Here?

A: Yeah.

H: What year? Well, my boy was born here. I'd say about '45, '44.

A: Do you recall back then about what they charged rent?

H: Very little.

A: Yeah. And then they sold the houses, I guess, like the other places, what, ’19? Do you recall the exact year?

H: No, sir.

A: Around 1950, I think.

H: I believe it was before then, but I’m not sure.

A: And how much did y’all pay for this one? Do you recall?

H: Oh, I think right about $1700.

A: Now, when you came here and, for most of the time while you were working at Avondale, ‘till, what, the late 60s, Lee Bowles was superintendent at the plant. Who was your immediate supervisor during most of that time? Or do you recall?

H: Well, I’d have to say he was. At that time, they didn’t have shift foremans and all like that. Just technicians took care of all that. Take it all the way around…

A: Now, you said you started in the carding room.

H: Yeah.

A: Did you stay on there a good while?

H: I certainly did. Come out of there I believe it was in 1950 and went into the packaging department.

A: Yeah.

H: I guess I’m talking loud enough. I hope I am.

A: Let us check it, because I’m wondering myself on that.

[TAPE CUTS OFF]

A: Now that we’ve got that solved, now once you went in the carding room itself— let’s finish with that part of it first. You started out just working on the cards and that’s what you continued to do until you moved into the packing room? Or did you move up in the department?

H: No, no. At that time, you learned everything in there. You went from card to drawing, drawing to slubber—some of the people call ‘em plaining. And then back to picker. That was a _____(??). Then, I was a technician, I don’t know how long. I guess four or five years.

A: So, in other words repairing.

H: Yeah, overhauler. Not overhauler but a repairman, I guess would be what—and when I was on that job when I came out and went to the packing.

A: And the packing department? What jobs I guess, shipping?

H: No, no. You was just a straight packer. Well, this area—get everything ready, you know, and be sure everything's right. Of course, you had the packing and the weighing... All that except for shipping, no.

A: That's a separate thing altogether.

H: Different.

A: And some of the things I was wondering about are things outside of the mill itself. For instance, I know you had mentioned out in the yard that your son—what, is a rabbit hunter?

H: An outdoorsman.

A: What, do you just go out in the nearby fields, or where is your favorite—I mean, you don't have to give me the exact locations, but some of your favorite areas to hunt.

H: Just anywhere where there's rabbits. Or squirrels. 'Course TVA now is the biggest park, the fourth one in this area.

A: Yeah, and usually, what do you hunt with? Just a small—

H: Single barrel. Single barrel, twin gauge…

A: And then in the summer, do you fish any?

H: A lot. Me and my wife, both of us…

A: Now that's what I thought, that you, in fact, don't you have a boat?

H: Yeah. Sure do. We go fishing every chance we get.

A: All kinds of fish, or do you have any—

H: No, no certain fish.

A: Mostly bass, or…?

H: Anything that'll hit a minnow or artificial…

A: Let's stop it for now.

{TAPE CUTS OFF]

A: Yeah, we—I was just watching the two of you as you talked and there seemed to have been almost a "between the lines" sort of dog trading going on there.

H: Maybe with me. I don't know about him. I've done quite a bit of dog trading myself.

A: Well, that's what I wanted to lead into. It seems like that type of thing is enjoyable.

H: It's a common thing in this part of the country, to have trade days for that not necessarily dog trading. Have you ever been to Collinsville?

A: Naw, I've heard a lot about dog trading.

H: Saturday. It you go over there, I'll bet you'd say, "I wouldn't take a thousand dollars for the trip." It's educational, no kidding

A: Like growing up in Scottsboro, I would go up to the first Monday trading.

H: Excuse me, but First Monday is not a drop to Collinsville.

A: Well, not just that but it seems to have gone down. I went by there today and it's not anything.

H: Any large one is the courthouse…

A: And changing the square just did away with the whole thing.

H: There's a little place over the mountain over here, "Tacklelbed" they call it. Now, they just about took all of it.

A: All that sort of thing.

H: It's open Saturday and Sunday, but mostly Sunday afternoon though.

A: Did you—do you usually try to take in a lot of these trade days? Or just—

H: Oh, no. Just—just when I think I need something to trade or whatever. When I think I need to go, I try to go.

A: What else do you try to trade besides dogs? Do you—I know gun trading used to be a big thing on the square, but I think the feds cracked down on that.

H: Not unless they were registered before. You used to not have to register your guns. I—no—I'm not much on gun trading. I've got some old guns. I pretty well keep those. Fact is, I got a 20-gauge I done told my grandson when I got disabled, he could have it. He rode over here yesterday morning and said, "What're you doing with that gun?" I just had it laying in my truck, you know. Didn't know what I might jump a rabbit at these dog traders. And I said, "Well, I'll take $250 for that gun." He looked at it and laughed. He said, "Would you sho nuff?"I said no I wouldn't just to be fair bout it. That's the one I'll give my grandson and I would have, if he'd have pulled out $250, said, "Here." I would've took it. Sorry, I should have said that to start with.

A: We were talking a while ago and you said you were quite an outdoorsman—that you really enjoyed the out-of-doors, and yet it seems that you fish and you hunt small game, but you don't go in for deer and that sort of thing.

H: Right, right. I can't pick 'em out anymore.

A: I was wondering. Did you used to do a lot of deer?

H: Naw, not too much deer. I went up to Tuscumbia and Moulton and they have big deer, of course. And I used to go up there some with my uncle then, but I haven't deer hunted much up in here.

A: But, like I have a brother-in-law who's a big bass fisherman and he enjoys duck season, but that's about it. I wonder, you know, why different people choose different sports to work at 'em, you know. Like in your case, it seems to me, fishing, squirrels, and rabbits.

H: Rabbits, right. Well, my opinion would be for that—it's mostly what you get used to. You come up and get used to duck hunting or squirrel hunting or whatever, uh, I believe…

A: Okay, let's look at that a minute. What do you see as far as working with others and the satisfaction it gives you between, say, duck hunting and squirrel hunting.

H: Well, I'll rephrase that: "working with".

A: Okay.

H: If you will.

A: Okay.

H: Rephrase it.

A: Okay, like…

H: Communicate with or by, any—uh—excuse me. There are people that will impose on it.

A: Okay.

H: They come to you, you may be at a place hunting. And they just come right in on you, with that imposing, they—

A: Yeah, yeah.

H: And like that, that's the reason I asked you to rephrase that. The working.

A: Okay, that's what I was getting at. This sort of thing of what makes squirrel hunting to you different from duck hunting as far as what you get out of it?

H: What makes it different to me? Okay, in duck hunting now, a man don't really know what to kill when he goes. He buys two different _____(??) federal and state and plus license and all and you really don't know to kill if you go and get caught, they goin to fine you. Now squirrels hunting, anybody knows what an old squirrel is. Not only that, they'd just a whole lot easier when you get on up in years to walk out here an ease around to the woods and be about to get out in zero winter and like that hunting.

A: Yeah, I was wondering about that. My brother-in-law enjoys duck hunting and he has to get up before dawn and go out freezing.

H: Not allowed to shot em til sun up

A: Yeah.

H: I used to enjoy it. It's a good sport.

A: Like, in squirrel hunting, what would you think about the sport itself, as far as how difficult it is.

H: Well, on the difficult part of part, squirrel hunting is one of the easiest I guess but If you got a dog, you tree him, fine. But if you just ease through and wait and watch. I can say it's the laziest part of hunting, I guess.

A: Well, also there are some hunters who just do it for the sport and others who really enjoy eating the venison if it's deer or squirrel or duck. What do you think about it when it comes on to the table?

H: I like it. I enjoy it, but they are—I know quite a few, I mean good fishermen [who] really enjoy catching 'em, that wouldn't eat 'em, wouldn't clean 'em. Same way with deer, rabbit, or whatever. Still, they enjoy hunting.

A: Well, I enjoy the eating, especially the fish. Now, you mentioned that you and your wife enjoy fishing together.

H: Right.

A: That seems to be something that would really give you a lot of pleasure, getting out and just relaxing.

H: We go every chance we get—you know spring when they're really bitin, early summer. When the weather permits, we go every chance we get.

A: Now, getting back to your work itself. What type of changes have you seen over the years? You worked—are working—be soon be forty years.

H: Going on thirty-nine.

A: You've seen a lot of water under the dam.

H: This next ninth day of February it will be thirty-nine, I believe it is. Now, back to the question, what changes have I seen?

A: Yeah, how have you seen—

H: Well, more production. 'Course that's understandable, more quantity and less quality. Used to be quality… and I really don't know what to say.

A: Well, what about things like the workers working together? Do y'all have a sense of togetherness? I know it used to be very much the case back in the 30s, which is what I've been—

H: Yeah, you take a group of people, well it's just like a ball team… the last years is always the best. And you take a group of people that's worked together a long time, they understand one another. But now they don't… It's hard to keep young ones and old ones… mill… It makes it a little difficult for

A: Now, people like you and Dick Ballard and others are retired or nearing retirement. Does there seem to be a big age gap or a generation gap between those of you like that and younger ones?

H: No, I understand what you mean by that. No. I think they're just as nice to one another as far as that part goes.

A: I'm wondering about the relationship of the mill to the community. For instance, I know back in the 20s and 30s in a town like Sylacauga, the folks that worked in the mill and the people that worked in the white collar jobs downtown, they saw a big gulf—a big difference between the two.

H: Wait, wait. Pardon me. Say that again.

A: Okay. In a textile town, in a mill town like Sylacauga, you used to see a difference, or at least the community drew the line between cotton mill workers, what people worked in the downtown would call the "lint heads," and the people who worked downtown in the shops and stores.

H: I see what you're getting at.

A: Did you have the same sort of thing in Stevenson? Or was it such a small community that that sort of difference—

H: No, I really—you take in a small community that way, the biggest part of people are kin. Some way or another, it works. So, therefore, that wouldn't make any difference. That's what I wanted to straighten up. Around Sylacauga, oh, I don't know about now, but used to the Comers [were] the biggest part right in Sylacauga there was a kin related to the Comers. What was not kin to 'em were, well, friendly to them—good friends. And I think that worked for everybody, little old community. Of course, Sylacauga was pretty good size, but still, they ran that way, built a school down there and all that. Just one big happy community, I'd say.

A: Now around here, I got the impression that a lot of people who worked in the mill had farms, drove in, and then would go back at night and try to keep a farm going on the side.

H: Right, and would get off—if they could they'd get off—to plant or like that. That is true. And they were pretty nice to 'em about it. They were several right off, I couldn't even name 'em, but there were several that did that. They were nice to 'em.

A: So, during that planting and harvest season, they'd get maybe a little more time off in order to get that done, and then come back to the mill after it was gathered in.

H: Yeah, Mr. Bowles, he was real nice about that. I'm not going to say this, but I thought… I'd better hush. He was a fine old fellow. I will say, only going to lunch the girls said he was spoiled, so I'll say that. And he, when I told you about him coming over here to see me here not long ago?

A: Yeah.

H: He was really tore up about what they'd done.

A: With Mary Ann?

H: Sure was. He said, "If he ever starts tearing down, I'm leaving town. I don't want to be here." Yeah, Mr. Bowles is fine fellow. His wife, family… he had a nice family.

A: Now let me check what we've got here.

[TAPE CUTS OFF]

A: When, uh, you were working with the mill, I noticed that also—what?— a brother [and] a sister worked at one time or another.

H: Right.

A: Now your sister retired.

H: Right, my brother too now. Both.

A: So both of them worked at the mill all of their life?

H: No. No. My brother went to work in Lafayette, Georgia—the E.T. Bar. Worked over there I don't know how many years, but he eventually came back here and worked awhile, and then retired. My sister, she worked here all her life.

A: Well, were you the first of the family to work at the mill?

H: No, no. I guess I was the second one.

A: Your sister had started before you?

H: Yeah.

A: I'm wondering about that family connection. Did a lot of families, you know, two or three members of the family work at the mill?

H: Mean in mine. Or just—

A: Well, just in general.

H: I tell you, Mr. Bowles founded a policy to get people to work. [He would] take a man and his wife, put both of them on, and they would work better, see? And he used that through the years which I think was a good policy. And he would work both that way. You know it worked out better.

A: Okay now, like I know Dick Ballard's son, Wallace is—works with the mill. Did a lot of that take place, where you know a number of the kids whose parents had worked at the mill?

H: Well, in the olden days, I think they did more so than they do now.

A: So that part of it has changed.

H: A whole lot. Most of 'em now want better jobs, go to college, and like that see and they can't—Avondale can't pay 'em like they should.

A: Well, the mill here now is mostly carpet yarns, is that it?

H: Synthetics.

A: Yeah. Most of the stuff they turn out.

H: Most of it, well every kind that's made here now is for carpet.

A: Yeah. Now, as your kids grew up, did they work at the mill any?

H: No. My daughter worked in the office when she was going to school, a year or two. The boy never worked.

A: Yeah. How did y'all feel about your children? Did you want them to get out, better themselves?

H: No, no. I didn't want it. The girl went to work in the office. She wanted her some extra money and naturally the office paid and a good friend Mr. Bowles, he put her on. Went in after school, worked in the evening, and after she finished school, she went to work up in _____(??)

A: Now did Mrs. Hackworth any at the mill?

H: Yes. She worked 'till she got disabled.

A: So she worked with 'em about how many years?

H: Mmm, I'd say twenty, maybe twenty years. That's a rough guess. Things sure have changed from what they used to be, a lot of ways.

A: Some probably for the better and others you wished had stayed the same.

H: Oh well, I'm for progress. Everybody just as well be.

A: 'Cause it's going to roll over us or around us.

H: That's true. A lot of them don't like to see old ways change like that but that's the way it goes.

A: Well, what about the Comer family itself? Do you recall much contact, them coming up here quite a bit?

H: Mr. Donald and Mr. Hughes are two of the finest men that's ever lived.

A: So, I know Hugh was in direct charge in Stevenson for quite a while.

H: Yeah, and then Mr. Donald.

A: … was in overall charge at first

H: He was in there before, I believe, Mr. J. Craig Smith.

A: That's correct.

H: There was another fine fella. Things weren't going the other way when he got out.

A: Now how often—'cause it used to be quite a ways up here back when roads weren't as good, about how often would they get up to Stevenson each year?

H: Well, I'm going to tell you, they had an inspection, once a year.

A: Yeah, in the spring.

H: And the old saying, "hell or high water", they come. They'd be here for that inspection, but now would come between those periods. I don't know how many times. They would be here. I want to mention Mr. Henry Warren, who….

A: How, I haven't come across the name before. Who was he?

H: He was over all the buyers and everybody else. He was the type of feller that it didn't make no difference. He bought everything, had to go through him, and everybody knew him and if he called and said—well, he used to be a little vulgar, not vulgar, but "hell" and like that. He'd say, "Hell, now I need the 'so and so.'" Well, that's all they wanted. To hear him say that. They know it was good as gold.

A: Now, back when Hugh and Donald and even like you say into J. Craig's years as head of the company, I get the impression that during the time, there was a lot of personal interest in what was going on. You know, it seemed to be beyond just a company interest and really concerned with people.

H: Let me put that in about one or two words.

H: I think they were better feelings at that time between supervision and employees. I really do.

A: Do you recall any particular stories or anything of your own about their talking with you or showing an interest in folks up here. I know in talking with people in Birmingham or course, Donald Comer was at the Birmingham Mill, so he had a lot more contact with them, so they can always come up with some story about a fish fry or a barbecue and his talking with the workers. I think that's something that always caught people.

[TAPE CUTS OFF]

A: We had just been talking about whether up here at Stevenson, do you recall any special situations—sometimes some of them humorous and others are just showing the type of attitude that Donald Comer and Hugh and J. Craig Smith showed. I know those barbecues were pretty big happenings.

H: Right, they were nice. They'd get a barbecue like on a special occasion like so many hours, man hours without an accident and all that. They certainly were. They were nice, yeah.

A: Uh, Mr. Bowles was telling me that the time they bought the mill, they also bought—a spring came with it up on the back.

H: Right. On the side of the mountain.

A: Now, but the time you started working with them, had they already switched over to all electric motors and such.

H: Oh, yeah

A: I know that, talking with Dick, back in the 30s, they were still using steam belt driven situation.

H: Steam.

A: Well, Mr. Hackworth, I appreciate this time, and I'm going to have to let you get on to dinner.

H: Why, that's perfectly alright. You stay and eat with us.

A: I'd better get on back to Scottsboro.

[TAPE ENDS]